

## Issue 1: Vision and Objectives

### **1.1: Is there a firm vision and aims for the rural area of the Borough which reflect its needs and distinctiveness, which carry forward those of the Core Strategy and Sustainable Community Strategy and which are reflected in the DPD policies?**

Paragraph 4.1 of the submitted DPD starts by stating that *“the Council’s vision for the rural parts of the Borough is expressed in Chapter 6 of the Core Strategy”*. We disagree with that statement. It is our reading of the Core Strategy that it is Chapter 1 that seeks to set out the vision of the Core Strategy, including in paragraph 1.29 for the rural areas. This culminates in Policy CS1 *“Guiding Principles”* which is expressed as a series of planning objectives which are generally applicable but with point C being specifically applicable to the rural area.

Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 of the Core Strategy then set out the spatial strategy for the Borough as a whole; the town centre; the rest of the urban area; the urban extensions; and the rural areas respectively. With regard to the rural areas, Chapter 6 of the Core Strategy essentially seeks to explain the approach to development culminating in Policy CS6 which sets out the hierarchy of settlements and housing development quantities. This is then followed by a section headed ‘The Countryside’ which again primarily sets out the approach to development. None of this text actually comprises a vision for the rural area.

Consequently, the only part of the Core Strategy that explicitly claims to be a vision is page 5, principally the highlighted paragraphs 1.27 – 1.29. It is paragraph 1.29 that relates to the rural area and this states:

*“Growth targets will not be met by development in the rural part of the Borough. In that area development will be restricted to that which is genuinely needed to ensure the economic and social well-being of rural residents and workers and build sustainable and balanced rural communities. Most development will take place in the larger and more sustainable rural settlements, especially Tenterden, Charing, Hamstreet and Wye. A high priority will be given to protecting and enhancing the natural and built environment of the rural areas, especially those parts that have a special designation and those that are closest to the existing and proposed built up area of Ashford.”*

We do not consider that this can be described as a firm vision that reflects the needs and distinctiveness of the rural area, as posed in the Inspector’s question.

Turning to the submitted DPD, we find it a little odd that Chapter 4 is headed ‘The Vision’, but then starts by saying that the vision is expressed in Chapter 6 of the Core Strategy – on which we comment above. Having referred the reader to the Core Strategy, the rest of the Chapter is essentially a description of the area; an explanation of the role of the various settlements in terms of service provision; a reiteration of the settlement hierarchy approach as included in Core Strategy Policy CS6; and a section on design. We do not consider that this comprises a vision for the rural area, though it does draw out some of the distinctiveness of the rural area.

Consequently, we consider that Chapter 4 of the DPD needs to be re-cast to properly present a vision for the rural area. We put forward our attempt at an alternatively worded Chapter 4 in Annex 1 to this statement. We would not claim this to be perfect, but we offer it as a basis for discussion at the Examination and would welcome the Borough Council’s views on it.

We should add, though, that this suggested alternative Chapter 4 should be considered in the context of the DPD as currently proposed. The Inspector is aware that our representations in regard to Issue 2 (i.e. TPV43, 44 and 49) would result in a different approach to the allocation of new housing sites, which would have some wider implications for the DPD including the vision.

**1.2: In particular, how does the vision of the DPD carry forward that of the Council’s Sustainable Community Strategy [pg 3] “to ensure that new housing is accompanied by new jobs and all the necessary social and community infrastructure” and the Core Strategy [parag 1.29] “....development needed to ensure the economic and social well-being of rural residents and workers and to build sustainable and balanced rural communities”?**

No further comment

**1.3: Is the DPD’s approach to sustainable development in rural areas limited by its concentration on housing issues?**

No further comment

**1.4: Is the DPD truly Spatial – does it bring together policies for the development of land with other policies and programmes from the Sustainable Community Strategy, and a variety of organisations, which influence how rural places function?**

No comment

**1.5: Is the vision or aims of the DPD accompanied by objectives against which policies can be measured? (To be discussed in more detail under Monitoring)**

No comment



Suggested Alternative Wording for Chapter 4

**4 The Vision**

- 4.1** The Council's overarching vision for the rural parts of the Borough is expressed in paragraph 1.29 of the Core Strategy as follows:

*“Growth targets will not be met by development in the rural part of the Borough. In that area development will be restricted to that which is genuinely needed to ensure the economic and social well-being of rural residents and workers and build sustainable and balanced rural communities. Most development will take place in the larger and more sustainable rural settlements, especially Tenterden, Charing, Hamstreet and Wye. A high priority will be given to protecting and enhancing the natural and built environment of the rural areas, especially those parts that have a special designation and those that are closest to the existing and proposed built up area of Ashford.”*

It is appropriate for this DPD to flesh out this vision, to highlight the distinctiveness of rural Ashford and to visualise what the rural area will look like by 2021 as a result of the spatial strategy contained in Core Strategy Policy CS6, the Guiding Principles contained in Core Strategy Policy CS1 and the DPD policies generally.

Protecting and Enhancing the Natural and Historic Environment

- 4.2** At the heart of the Core Strategy vision is the need to protect and enhance the rich and varied natural and historic environment that contributes so much to the character of this part of Kent. The rural areas of the Borough are defined by attractive rolling countryside, including parts of two AONBs (the Kent Downs in the north and east and the High Weald in the south and west). The countryside offers an intrinsic character, heritage and beauty with a diverse mix of rich landscape features and characteristics. It also plays a key recreational role for residents and visitors alike, whilst supporting an array of wildlife, habitats and natural resources. Within the open countryside, the paramount planning objective is the control of new development to ensure that its quality is not eroded or diminished.
- 4.3** Closely associated with the natural environment is a long legacy of human activity. This has, over many centuries, created historic routeways, farms, settlements, landscapes, parks, gardens and a wealth of distinguished buildings. These historical assets all contribute, individually and collectively, to the character and nature of the rural area. It is the objective of this DPD to ensure that along

with the countryside itself this historical heritage is also protected and maintained, and that development that would undermine it is not allowed.

- 4.4** However, it is necessary to ensure an appropriate balance between protecting the countryside and its historic heritage and meeting the needs of the highly valued rural economy. The countryside has always seen change, and it cannot be set in aspic. In fact, the protection of the countryside often relies on viable agriculture and rural businesses to manage and maintain the landscape. Therefore, the DPD provides a range of policies which respond to the needs of the changing rural economy, ensuring its continued vibrancy and vitality, whilst also ensuring any impact is acceptable.

#### Supporting Sustainable and Balanced Rural Communities

- 4.5** Part of the character and quality of the countryside is the mix of rural settlements present. These range from the rural market town of Tenterden, which is the second largest settlement in the Borough after Ashford itself, to an array of small villages and hamlets. Together and individually the rural settlements offer an attractive and varied character, which is often derived from their historical status. The rural settlements are often regarded as the defining image of the Borough and it is essential that planning policies reflect their inherent qualities and characteristics that play such a key role in determining the overall character of the rural area.
- 4.6** To varying degrees, the rural settlements provide important services and facilities for rural residents. They also provide valuable job opportunities. The Core Strategy identifies a number of rural service centres - Tenterden, Charing, Hamstreet, Wye, Aldington, Bethersden, Biddenden, Chilham, Pluckley, Rolvenden and Woodchurch – which offer a good level of service provision. Together, these rural service centres serve and sustain not only their immediate residents, but also those of the smaller surrounding rural communities as well. Many also provide local job opportunities. The DPD will ensure that the service centre role of these settlements is maintained and enhanced.
- 4.7** Tenterden offers a significantly higher level of service provision compared to the other rural service centre. As such it is a highly important focal point in the rural area and serves a wide hinterland within and beyond the Borough's boundary by offering a range of employment, cultural, shopping, tourist and leisure opportunities.
- 4.8** Tenterden's character is of exceptional conservation and historical importance, derived from its well defined pattern of development around the historic core area, including many listed buildings. Tenterden is a key tourist attraction, drawing regular visitors from abroad and from elsewhere in the UK. It is a real asset to the Borough and has a busy and thriving town centre. The DPD's priority

is to retain the qualities that make Tenterden special, and to maintain and enhance its primacy as a service centre serving a wide rural area.

- 4.9** In order to support the continued vitality of the rural service centres, and to meet identified housing needs (including for affordable housing), some new housing development will be necessary as proposed by the Core Strategy. Core Strategy Policy CS6 identifies Tenterden, Charing, Hamstreet and Wye as the focus for the majority of new housing development in the rural areas.
- 4.10** About half of the housing development proposed in the Core Strategy will be at Tenterden. This will help the town to continue to perform its important role as a shopping and service centre serving a wide area, and as an employment and tourist centre. However, new development must recognise that the primary objective is to conserve the special character of the town and its rural setting, and its historic fabric. To this end, development will be restricted to sites identified in the DPD and the redevelopment or minor development of sites within the existing built area.
- 4.11** Core Strategy Policy CS6 also identifies a provisional ‘third tier’ of settlements which should be further assessed to determine those that could be attributed new, but limited, housing development. After further analysis the Borough Council considers that the rural service centres of Aldington, Bethersden, Biddenden, Chilham, Rolvenden and Woodchurch would comprise such a third tier where some limited housing development would be appropriate to meet local housing needs and help sustain their vital services.
- 4.12** Many of the smaller villages also provide a degree of local service provision for their residents. It is essential that this role continues to retain the economic and social vitality of village life. In these settlements, small scale infill development may be appropriate together with new affordable housing on ‘exception’ sites. Such development will allow the continuation of organic growth and evolution, and will help to avoid economic stagnation without fundamentally altering the character of the place.
- 4.13** The Council believes that only the adoption of a carefully managed approach to the release of suitable land for development will ensure that change in the rural area occurs in a controlled way without significant harm to the countryside or the attractive nature and character of the Borough's settlements. This DPD, in line with Core Strategy Policy CS6, advocates a phased approach to the release of acceptable housing development sites in the identified settlements.

#### Design of Development

- 4.14** The design of development proposals in the rural areas will need to positively respond to the highly varied characteristics and features which make up the different village and countryside environments found across the Borough.

- 4.15** Given the particularly sensitive nature of much of the Borough's rural areas, the Council regards good design as fundamental to creating attractive and sustainable new development in those areas. The qualitative aspect of development schemes will be rigorously assessed.
- 4.16** It will be necessary for applicants to produce designs that are complementary to the local vernacular, although this should not prevent the scope for innovation and contemporary designs where these can be justified in the context of a site and where they may create additional visual interest and richness into an area.
- 4.17** Where the Council has adopted Village or Parish Design Statements, applicants will be expected to have incorporated the key principles contained in those Statements in their development proposals. The Tenterden Healthcheck and Action Plan Report should also be taken into consideration for applications in the Tenterden area.

**In summary, the vision of this DPD is that by 2021:**

- **the unique character and quality of the natural and historic environment of the rural area is maintained.**
- **the AONBs continue to be afforded the strongest possible protection to ensure that they remain the jewel in the crown of rural Ashford.**
- **there will continue to be a living and vibrant countryside which, through careful management, will meet the demands of agriculture, agricultural diversification, tourism and public access without undermining the importance of landscape character, scenic value and historical legacy.**
- **the rural service centres are strong, vibrant and sustainable communities that cater for the everyday needs of their residents and those of nearby smaller rural communities and visitors, and that an enhanced range of job opportunities is provided.**
- **the smaller villages and hamlets continue to be viable communities with a retained, and if possible, an enhanced level of local services.**
- **planned new housing development has been successfully delivered and is of a high quality of design appropriate to its location, and has high energy efficiency credentials.**
- **new housing development will have addressed local housing needs and priorities.**